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A NEW MITHRAIC RELIEF FROM SYRIA

[PLATE III]

THE discoveries and investigations of the American expedition in the area of the temples of Sī' have made known an extremely valuable and unusual group of works of the first century B.C.; valuable not merely on account of their Augustan date but because they represent a native eastern art that had not yet been drawn into the sphere of Roman influence.¹

The director of the expedition, Professor Howard C. Butler, has very generously given me the privilege of publishing one of his discoveries. It is a relief of Mithra slaying the bull, which was unearthed inside the area of the great temple of Sī'² and is the most important piece of sculpture discovered.

The relief (PLATE III) is carved on a slab of basalt, 72 cm. high, 58 cm. wide, and 10 cm. thick, which undoubtedly belonged to a local subterranean shrine of Mithra situated at some point inside the temple area,³ but which has not thus far been located.

The surface seems in fairly good condition, except along the lower part of the right hand edge which has not only been somewhat broken but has had a part of the relief cut away,

¹ *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904-1905 and 1909*. Div. II. *Ancient Architecture in Syria*, by Howard C. Butler. Sect. A. Southern Syria. Pt. 6. Sī'. Brill, Leyden, 1916.

² *Ibid.* p. 398; ill. 344 B. What is here said of the relief is: "The most important piece of sculpture discovered here by the Princeton Expeditions was a relief in basalt illustrating the cult of Mithras which was found in front of the temple of Dūsharā. The slab is almost intact, it measures 58 by 72 cm. and is about 10 cm. thick. The subject of the main relief is the usual representation of Mithras wearing a Phrygian cap, sitting sideways upon the bull, with his left hand upon the bull's head and with his right plunging a knife into the bull's shoulder. The usual accompaniments are here, the dog licking the blood, the serpent and the scorpion; but there are other figures besides. . . ."

³ There are two temples at Sī': a smaller, outer, temple of Dūsharā, on the left side of the fore-court as one approaches the larger, inner, temple of Ba'al Shamīn. The relief was found in the fore-court, opposite the centre of the façade of the small temple.

obliterating some of the lower part of the dog and whatever else was to the right of the fore-front of the bull. The fact that the figured relief work is carried to the very edge of the block, allowing for no framing or even encircling band, would indicate that the relief was originally set in a recess or tabernacle, instead of standing free. This is confirmed by the rough, unfinished state of the back of the slab. In any case it was the cult-image of the sanctuary.

Before discussing the subject it will be necessary to give a brief summary of its symbolic meaning, for the benefit of those unfamiliar with the tenets and symbolism of the Mithraic religion.

The Divine Bull was created in the beginning by the supreme god, Ormuzd, as the source from which all the animal and vegetable life of the world was to proceed. But only through its death could the earth be made fruitful. Sacrificed by the young hero-god Mithra, emissary of the creator Ormuzd himself, the seed of the Bull was carried to the moon, there to be purified and held, and thence to descend at the right time to bring all things to life. Or else, the seed and blood were absorbed by the earth, to be given forth in due season. The time of the sacrifice was the end of the summer, when the life of nature was dried up, and the resurgence was to be in the spring time. It was another form of the myths of Tammuz, of Osiris, of Attis, and of Adonis. Mithra, as the sun-god, represented the action of the sun, in turn creative and destructive. At the end of the world in the universal resurrection the divine bull will reappear to suffer again a supreme sacrifice to endow all humanity with immortality.

At first blush there might not appear to be anything especially novel in the treatment of the scene, and one might consider it rather casually as merely a crudely executed addition to the already large corpus of these reliefs of Mithra, nearly all of which are published in Cumont's monumental work.¹ In this corpus there are a number of examples of the simpler form of the scene which seem practically identical. In Fig. 1 is a relief from Apulum in Dacia (C. fig. 172), where the similarities are striking: they are hardly less so in the Wallachian relief (C. fig. 123) of Fig. 2, and the North-Italian reliefs (C. figs. 105 and 87) of Figs. 3 and 4, as well as in Cumont's figs. 207, 208, 419, etc.

The bull is facing, as usual, to the right, having fallen forward

¹ *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, 1896-1899.

on one knee, in a quite impossible attitude, considering the bending of the kneeling fore-leg. The awkwardness is increased by the unexpected appearance of the left hind leg, in an equally impos-

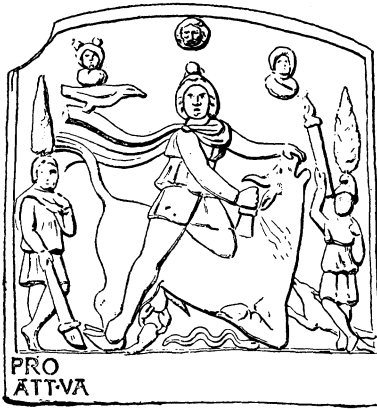


FIGURE 1.—MITHRAIC RELIEF FROM APULUM.

genius of Mithra with the raised torch, occupies the middle left side, and there can be little doubt that, after the analogy of all the other replicas of the scene, we should see the companion figure of Cautopati, with the lowered torch, in the damaged right-hand border, where it seems just possible to place him. The torch-bearer is as usual an exact replica, on a small scale, of the central Mithra, with the same cap and dress, though without much indication of detail. The dog is springing upward to the dagger's point. Under the bull's body are the serpent and the scorpion, which are indispensable to the scene. In the staging of the main group, the position of the bull and of Mithra, the flying drapery, and the costume itself run strikingly true to the formal type. The elements are the earliest and simplest used in such

sible place between the serpent and the scorpion. Mithra is partly kneeling on, partly resting against, the bull's back and pulls its head back with his left hand while stabbing it with his right in the shoulder. As usual, also, he turns his head away. The bust of the sun occupies the left, and that of the moon the right upper corner, and the crow impinges on the sun's nimbus, appearing to rest on Mithra's flying drapery. The figure of Cauti, the



FIGURE 2.—MITHRAIC RELIEF FROM WALLACHIA.

scenes without the lion or the vase or the trees, which seem to belong to a later evolutionary stage.

The hammered surface and broken edge on the right side of the relief have not only destroyed the lower part of the dog but obliterated the figure of the second torch-bearer. Still, there can be no question but that he must have been there. There is not a single Mithraic relief with just a single torch-bearer. In fact it is possible to distinguish, next to the bull, the outline of the down-turned torch which he held. He must either have been smaller than his mate or have stood somewhat lower, because his head could not have risen above the bull's chin.



FIGURE 3.—MITHRAIC RELIEF
AT VERONA.



FIGURE 4.—MITHRAIC RELIEF AT NAPLES.

A more careful examination shows at least two important variations from the normal type of reliefs of this class; variations in which this relief is either unique or almost so. They are so important that they would in themselves, I believe, prove that we have here a work that stands thus far alone in the Mithraic corpus. As it is the only one that was produced in a region geographically outside Roman territory, so it is, I believe, the only one that represents a Mithraic tradition unattached to the Hellenistic-Roman matrix from which the Mithraic monuments of the imperial age were turned out in such numbers, and with such uniformity.

These points are:

(1) The fact that the tail of the bull falls downward instead of curving upward;

(2) That the serpent instead of either rising toward the wound, as in most cases, or drinking out of a vase, or lying on the ground, is drinking from the bull's penis.

First, as to the position of the tail. Students of Mithraic symbolism are well aware of the function of the tail of the bull.¹ It is from the bull's spinal cord that the wheat springs that is to feed the world; while from its blood comes the vine that produces the sacred wine of the mystic rites. Therefore, in so many of the reliefs the upraised tail is represented as ending in wheat. The number of the ears represented varies; there may be one or three or even five, but the number is always uneven,—the uneven numbers being considered lucky. This is the orthodox Hellenistic-Roman formula. In our relief it is not followed. The break in the stone prevents absolute certainty as to how the tail ended, but it is hardly likely that from the end of the down-turned tail any wheat projected. Apparently the oriental mind did not require this touch of realism.

In the second place the variation in the function of the serpent is strikingly significant. It is generally admitted, I think, that the serpent in this connection represents the earth in its phase of receptivity preparatory to rebirth: chthonic force potential with future life. This is quite evident in such reliefs as Cumont, fig. 115, where the serpent lies outside the field of sacrifice. In the Hellenistic-Roman formula the serpent seems often to be drinking the blood of the bull directly from the wound, as it gushes forth when Mithra has planted his dagger. There are two variants from this formula in certain cases, where, as in Fig. 5 (C. fig. 99), the serpent lies close to the earth and may be depicted as drinking the blood as it trickles to the ground; or else, as in Fig. 6 (C. pl. VII), where the serpent is about to drink from the contents of a vase. What does this vase contain? This is a question that has not, I believe, been thoroughly discussed. It is natural to infer that its contents are not a hypothetical, generic, water of life, but something proceeding from or connected with

¹ A brief statement is in Cumont's abridgment, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, and a fuller one in his *Textes et Mon.* For the passages in Persian literature the translations in the *Sacred Books of the East* (ed. by Max Müller) are the most convenient source; both the *Zendavesta* and the later Pahlavi writings.

the sacrifice of the bull. And yet this inference seems not to have been drawn, and Cumont's conclusion is that the vase simply contains water.

The usually accepted interpretation of the vase is that it contains water symbolizing the element of water in the universe, as the lion is the symbol of fire, and the serpent that of earth, while Cumont considers the fourth element, air, to be symbolized by the Phrygian cap of Mithra, which sometimes appears alone, set on top of a pole. It is well known that the Mazdaeans worshipped the four elements, so that the above interpretation is

both plausible and probable. But, should we not try to make a closer connection than this between the death of the bull and these subsidiary elements in the scene? Certainly the activity shown in some of the reliefs by the



FIGURE 5.—MITHRAIC RELIEF FROM BOLOGNA.

lion and the snake indicates not a state of cosmic indifference but participation in some dramatic incident. The fact that in so many cases where there is no vase the serpent is evidently drinking the blood of the bull directly from the wound, ought to be a sufficient proof that when, in the later and more elaborate *mise-en-scene*, a vase is introduced from which the serpent is made to drink, the liquid which he then drinks, is the same, *i.e.* is the bull's blood. While not excluding the later association of the crater with the water of life, it seems to me probable that the original Persian associations was with the bull's blood.

But there is a third possibility. It was from the seed of the bull transported at his death to the sphere of the moon, that creation was to be produced. In several reliefs the vase is so

placed under the bull as to suggest that the seed of the dying bull is being collected in it for preservation, for example in the Heddernheim relief in Fig. 6 (C. pl. VII).

Therefore the theory of the four elements as represented by lion, vase, serpent, and Phrygian cap, while it may be true of later symbolism, seems hardly applicable to the earlier naturalistic



FIGURE 6.—MITHRAIC RELIEF FROM HEDDERNHEIM.

stage when I believe that the blood and seed of the bull are alone in question as the sources of future life on the earth, represented by the serpent.

This gives, I think, the key to the function of the snake in the Si' relief. Instead of representing it, in euphemistic fashion, as absorbing the seed of life at second hand, from a classic vase, it is receiving it directly from the source of supply. The fact that

even Hellenistic-Roman artists represented the seed of life as issuing, in one last outburst, from the bull, is seen in the most beautiful of all Mithraic reliefs, that at the Vatican (Cumont, fig. 37, p. 210), where the seed is being poured out upon the earth itself, to be absorbed by it. The mode of treating the theme in our relief has the customary directness of oriental sexual mysticism. As I have already said, there is no other known relief in which the serpent plays this part, and it seems to give weight to the interpretation of the contents of the vase as being the life-blood or seed of the bull.

As for the scorpion, while there is nothing unusual in this particular instance, it is interesting to refer to a general question that may be asked in connection with the Mithraic reliefs,—and this includes practically all—in which the scorpion is shown. The scorpion is always gripping the testicles, but only in one case, the famous large relief of the Capitoline Museum (C. pl. 1 and fig. 18) is he also certainly stinging with his tail. In our relief, as in the usual type, the scorpion's tail falls below his body. The scorpion, whatever else he may be doing, is not poisoning the life-containing tissues as is usually supposed, but is rather devouring and tearing them.

In suggesting a date for the relief the first criterion would be a comparison with the carved work on the temples themselves. Here we are on solid ground because a Nabataean inscription found at Si' states that the temple of Ba'al Shamīn was begun in 33–32 B.C., and the inscription itself was written in 13–12 B.C. A statue of King Herod was set up in the porch of the temple before 4 B.C. There was found an interesting head with a nimbus of sun-rays, which originally crowned the archway leading to the temple of Ba'al Shamīn, and evidently represents the god himself. There are other heads: of a trumpeter, of an almost life-size statue, etc. The technique is different from that of the relief of Mithra, being more archaic and sharp in outlines.¹ With our present limited material it is dangerous to deny that the relief could be as early as Augustus, but I should be inclined to place it somewhat later.

The non-Roman treatment, however, would be against dating it as late as 106 A.D. when Cornelius Palma, under Trajan, turned this part of the county into a Roman province, the *Provincia*

¹ This is particularly evident in the treatment of nose and mouth.

Arabia. If this inference of a date in the first century of our era is correct, it would place this among the earliest known Mithraic monuments, most of which belong to the third century. This can be decided only by a careful comparison with works produced in this region and by the same pre-Roman school. The difficulty is that this part of the Hauran was artistically revolutionized by the Romans of the second and third centuries, so that to study the native schools, except in a very limited way, we must turn to such distant places as Palmyra.

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MITHRAIC RELIEF IN SYRIA.

EXCAVATED AT SÎ¹ BY THE PRINCETON EXPEDITION.